

[John and Rebecca Boyd]

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Boyd, John and Rebecca

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Lakeland, Florida

JOHN AND REBECCA BOYD, WELL DIGGER AND FARMER

In the City of Lakeland, located in the heart of the Citrus development of the State of Florida, there lives a Negro family who has seen Lakeland grow to it's present stage of development. They have maintained their respectability from their pionering period to the present time. The members of the family consist of, John and his wife Rebecca, their son Bryan, and John's two sisters Mary and Mattie. Mattie is the first Negro baby to be born in Lakeland, Florida.

John is tall and rawboned. He walks a little bent over, he is dark in complexion, with many gray hairs in his head. John was born in Cario, Georgia, having passed his sixty fifth birthday. His parents were Willis J. and Gabrella Boyd.

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Rebecca is very small in size, four feet and five inches in height, dark brown in complexion, with gray hairs in her head. They were very congenial and above the average in intelligence.

Rebecca said, " I will do the best I can to tell you about our early life, and what I found when I came to Lakeland in [1898?]. I came here from Thomasville, Georgia, where I was born. My parents Bryant and [Cherry Sanders?], were slaves. When I was small I used to hear them talk about slavery time. They said their slave master was Mr. [M.?.] Hutch. They [had?], father said, one hundred and fifty slaves on the plantation. He was considered a good slave master. Father died February [10?], 1895, at the age of seventy years old. My mother died in 1909. Our son Bryant was born in 1884, and I was born October 9,1870.

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" I married John while he was working in Arcadia, Florida, December 12,1900. My parents rented land to farm on in Thomasville, Georgia. They once had one hundred and fifty acres, and called it a three horse farm. There were fifteen children in our family, all of them are deceased except myself."

" When we came to Lakeland we settled near the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, near Lake Weir. At that time, nearly all the colored people lived in that section. There was about one hundred colored people living in Lakeland at that time. Now I hear them say that we have nearly four thousand colored people in Lakeland. That's jumping up some. They came here from every place."

Mattie was busy ironing in the back hallways. Rebecca called her. She came in and sat down." Now Mattie can tell you about herself. Mattie said," it is true that I am considered the first Negro child to be born in Lakeland. My parents were Willis J. and Gabrella Boyd. Willis died January 11, 1903, age 54. Gabrella died July 7, 1901, age 45. I was born May 1, 1886. I remembered the second colored child that was born in Lakeland, Lubenny Sullivan, (whose bible record was seen) was born June 14,1886. She is now living in

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Philadelphia, married and is known as Mrs. Livingston. She has three grown children. I know well the first white child born in Lakeland, she now lives in Tampa, Florida. Miss Dora Lee Bonaker, who is now Mrs Helm. Congressman, [A.?] J. Drane's son Orcian was born the same month that Miss Dora Lee was born."

" Where we lived was a wilderness. Pane street was near the depot. At that time Main, Pine, street, and Kentuckey avenue, were the main streets. Most of the business was located on Main street. I was born near Lake Weir along the railroad. Deep sand [trails?] with do [ruts?] in them. [?]. to your knees were the only paths 3 and roadways. The big wheels of the ox-carts cut them like this. This was the only mode of travel then. I use to ride them many days. Slow riding to what we have now. But we thought we were getting there fast."

" In 1898 I saw soldiers who camped around Lake Weir, Lake Morton, and Lake Hunter. They were on their way to the Spanish American War in Cuba. You remember the sixth of May when the Battleship Maine was sunk in 1898. The soldiers began pouring in the last of April, and it was the last of August before they all left. Those were some exciting times around Lakeland. I remember the colored Tenth [Cavalry?], The Illinois., The 1st [regimen?] from Ohio, and the 77th of New York. All of these were white soldiers. This place was the backing up place from Tampa. As fast as the ships would take them to Cuba they would leave out of Lakeland. Some never did get to go to Cuba, because the Tenth Cavalry had whipped them out under Colonel, Rossevelt. These were some days. Talking about hard times, that was no name for it."

" I attended Elementary school, only going as far as the sixth grade. At that time they did not have any more grades, until Prof. W.A. Rochelle brought the school up to the eighth grade. I left Lakeland and finished my schooling in Ocala at the Emerson school, going through the High school course."

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“ The first colored school located in Lakeland was at Florida Avenue and Main street where the People's Bank Building now stands. When they moved it from there, they held school in the Methodist church one season, and in the Baptist church another, moving sometimes to the Masonic Hall. This was kept up until 4 the first school was located in Morehead at Orange and Ohio Avenue in 1905. I taught in this school seven years, holding a third grade certificate. I have been married, but I divorced my husband. He is alive somewhere.”

“ Rebecca said, “ Mattie has something to be proud of being the first colored child born in Lakeland and still living to tell about it.”

“ I went to school myself. I attended the Hamilton school in Thomasville, Georgia. I went as far as the seventh grade. The school building was built out of logs with only one large room. We had two teachers, and about one hundred and fifty children. At that time we only had three months schooling, way long before the last they gave us six months. This was not long after freedom. We would play jumping the rope, and sometimes baseball, the girls played on one side and the boys on the other. Back there they didn't mix up with the boys.”

“ When I came to Lakeland, I was elected the First President of the Parent Teachers Association. We started with twenty members which grew to fifty members when I gave it up. I think education is the greatest thing in the world today. I don't think there is enough association of parents with teachers. Since Prof. Rochelle gave up the principleship we have not had the good fellowship with teachers. Things are different. We didn't have so many wayward girls during our times.”

“ When I first came here I remembered finding only eight Baptists, twenty five A M E Methodists, and five M E Methodists. I didn't know anything about Primitive Baptists at that time.

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That part of the Baptists popped up later. I have been a member of the Harmany Baptist Church thirty one years. John, does not belong to any church. When I was active in church, I was President of the B Y P U, teacher of the first Bible Class, treasurer of the Sunday School, head of the Deaconess Board, and President, once, of the Women's Home Missionary Society. I tried to give my soul to my church work. I think that the saving of souls has retarded in the last few years. I think the cause of the condition is slackness on the part of the churches today. Years ago they were better. The Old folks don't have any power over the young folks, because they set wrong kind of examples[!?!]

“ I had to give up all work when I had this stroke in 1935. I had the stroke on my left side. Now you see I am able to walk and use my hand. I had all of my teeth pulled out. You know bad teeth can poison your whole system. Before I was swept off of my feet, I weighed one hundred and thirty pounds. I suffer mostly from “High Blood Pressure” I have to watch my eating very carefully.”

“ Speaking of food- I remembered right after freedom how cheap things were. Around 1878 you could get a large hog for \$1.50; butter 15¢ a pound; bushel of potatoes 20¢¢ bushel of corn 25; eggs sold two dozen for 15¢, and you had to carry them eight and ten miles to the next town to sell them. A big change now. With this trouble I am having, it cost me a great deal for special food that I have to eat. I only eat fish, lamb, grits, butter, whole wheat bread, and corn bread when it is cooked well. Before I had this stroke I could eat anything. John and the rest of the family eat most any thing. ”

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“ I worry a great deal at times because I am not able to work like I used to. When I was on the farm in Georgia I was strong and worked hard. I hoed and picked cotton on my fathers farm. We only received 40¢ a hundred. A hundred pound was a whole lot of cotton to pick back there. They didn't have the cultivation like they have now. If you made thirty five cents a day you would do better than those who worked in domestic service, because they only made [\$?] 1.00 per week. Some places they would only make \$ 1.00 a month doing

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the housework and cooking. You sometime had to cook for eight and ten in the family. I had my family to feed and look out for. The way the mistress did, was to tell you to put a [peck?] of potatoes in the stove. When ordered to go to the smoke house, you were told to get the odds and ends of the meat to cook with the greens. What was left you could give to your children. That's the way they made up for their low pay. And that's the way the pan came about, I mean servants carrying pans home when they finished work. Carrying pans home is no new thing. My child would starve if I didn't carry a pan home at night. Mistress would give us all the old clothes and shoes. After President Grover Cleveland and Harrison, times changed and things began to pick up. Sometimes we would get from \$2.00 to \$ 2.50 a week. Things began to get better still after President William McKinley's and Theodore Roosevelt's time. when we came to Florida we found wages better than we got in Georgia. I hav'nt worked out very much. I worked up a good laundry business here at home. I would average from \$ 4.00 to \$15.00 a week when times were good. I thought once that this stroke I have came from washing a great deal. I was taught when I married John 7 to care for him. A women's place was at home. I thought my duty way back there was to cook, mend clothes, and keep a good clean house for him. I knew [if I?] was away I could not do that. I am from the old school. Things are different now. Everybody goes, and home takes care of itself.”

“ John followed work in the Phosphate mines from 1900 to 1907 with the “Tiger Bay Phosphate Company” they are out of business now. He also railroaded some, working here in the Coast Line railroad yard until 1925. On this job he would average sometimes \$ 100.00 a month. John is a good well digger. He makes from \$ 5.00 up to \$ 100.00 putting in wells and sprinkle systems in the graves. He had a call this morning to come out to Colonial drive to clean out a well. John farms on our twenty acre farm located in the South-West section of Lakeland. It is where Old Pa [Dix] lived. You remember the old man who was over a hundred years old when he died. That's the place. The shack is right on our land. We let a man stay in there now. John has'nt done so well with the farm this year.”

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“Bryant works on relief. Mattie and Mary stay at home and help with the laundry work. Mattie makes around five dollars every week. Work is not so plentiful now, lot of folks do their own work at home. I am fond of laundry work. What little John and myself accumulated came partly from my laundry work. We would put our little bits together so we could have something. Once we owned fourteen houses on this street. We lost them during the depression. All we saved was our home place and the twenty acres.

Some times, I begin to think that is too much since I have been unable to work. Bryant helps me out a lot. He is one son who has 8 stuck to his mother. It took lots of money to get me back in shape. If it were not for the help from this relief work we could not have pulled through. It has been lots of help to us. I have tried to get an old age pension, but I hav'nt been able to prove my age. About this laundry work around the town, I recall when colored women did nearly all of it. Now they have big places to do the laundry work, and that cuts us down same. A few folks like it the old way.”

“ If I were able to vote again I would vote for the democrats. I have voted since they allowed women to vote. John votes, too. We never had any trouble voting. We felt like we had a right to vote paying so much taxes every year.”

“ Since I had this stroke I can't walk very far. I try to walk to the stores on Florida Avenue and back again to give me exercise. Outside of that I keep busy with light work around the house. My biggest fun is working around the flowers and attending to my chickens. John usually piddles around the house and yard when he is home. Some times he walks up the street and sits on the Knights of [Chythian's?] steps on Florida Avenue, and gossips with some of his old cronies. When Bryant finishes work he like to dress up and walk down the street, or go to the movies. He likes moving pictures. You can see for yourself that Mattie and Mary are just plain home folks, they go to church on Sunday's and that's about all. I don't go around like I used too, I miss doing the little things for folks in the community.

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When I was active I tried to do my best as long as I could. I liked it too, to help other. I believe that is the reason the Lord has blessed me in my afflictions so far. ”

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To the delight of Rebecca, John came home. She said, “ I am glad you came home while “Professor” is here [.]?” He shook hands and expressed his appreciation in my calling. He shunned his overalls, and washed his face, and hands, and returned in a fresh overall and joined in the interview.

“ John stated that if you are talking about old time I can tell you a few thing, if Rebecca has told you our story would be about the same. You know a white man by the name of Mr. V.W. Stephenson, who lives at 937 W. 5th street. He used to live in a little house on 7th St near the Washington Park. Now he was the first man to sell me a lot in this town. He was one of the first white men to settle here in 1882 some years before I came. I have heard him say that Lakeland was named by Dr. Andrews. He aught to know because he was in the meeting when it was named. Right after then they layed the [town?] off in 1883 and 1884. They call him Judge now, he still owns lots of property in the white and colored section. The colored park he deeded it to the City to be used for a Negro park. I have worked hard trying to have something. I have never made anything easy in my life. From the looks of me it look like I have been a good man in my days. Since some of the folks have gone back to trucking and farming I have been kept busy digging wells and putting in sprinkling systems. I guess Rebecca told you about it. I think hard times has run them back to the soil. This has slowed me down with my work on my little farm. I don't have time to look after it like I aught too. You have a hard time to get some one to help you farm here in this town. Most of the colored men don't have farming in their bones, that's funny most of them came here off of the farm and it is 10 hard to get them back to it. ”

“ I have made pretty good off it at times. If nothing more, it has kept me out of the paper sack. We get all the fresh vegetables we want. The most I plant is corn, beans, tomatoes, pepper, [oats?], onions, squash, collard, [mustards?], and [sometime?] I try my hand at

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strawberries. I have my [land?] cultivated where it raises most anything. I have had some whopping good [watermelons?] out there. I happen to have some sandy spots. It takes that for watermelons. I do most of my planting by the moon. I don't know anything about this new method of farming. I [tak'] mine out of the old way of farming. It usually works."

" Well when it comes to digging wells I am considered to be the best in this section. That bragging [on herself?]. But the white folks say so. They ought to know. I have followed it for years. I learned it while working around the [Phosphate?] mines. We always had to sink a pipe to get water and I worked with [that?] crew. I can usually tell by sounding where to find water. All I have to do is to see the [mud?] and I can soon tell you if there is good water there. I hardly miss, some places I have to dig deeper than others. The best wells are dug thirty feet or deeper. You miss all of the top drainage. You know the water beneath the surface ran off in section, every so many feet. Some people say pump water will make you sick. That's because it is nothing deep enough. People [pour?] out their dish water, wash water, and some have their septic tools to close when the pump is not deep enough. That's the reason why. We have to pull up pipes every now and then and clean off the points. You have seen them. There is is a sharp point on the end, and it gets clogged up some time.

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"Old age is about to get me now, I am not as active as I once was. I have lost lots of money fooling with property, worries, big doctor bills, and all that works on a fellow pretty badly. You have to be a good draft horse to pull the load. "

" You know conditions are not like they use to be. I have seen big changes around here. I honestly think the Government is doing all it can to help people and business. But the people must help themselves some too. Many people are stuck in these towns. With all of this open country they could get out and grow something. That would help to thin them out. "

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“ About my religion, I bet Rebecca has been telling you about it. I speck I oughter get some kind of religion by this time. You will have to bring in a new flock of preachers to save me now. If I didn't see so much maybe I would do a little better. I give my share to the church even if I don't go. When them big rallies come off, they see my money, but they don't see me. I live my life. So far I think it has been a pretty good one. One thing I am not fed up on lots of false beliefs.”

“ When I had a good car I used to enjoying muself riding around looking at farms. If I have a good walk now I am happy.” John was called by a white man who knocked at the door and this conclude his interview. Rebecca, said,“ I am so glad you had a chance to talk to him, they don't let him stay home long. ”

The home of John and Rebecca is located on a very sandy Avenue. It is a large ten room weather- boarded house. Very well constructed and the exterior is painted white. There is a large porch extending across the front lower and upper, with large cement pillars. Vines are growing on trellises on both sides of the porch. Ferns in alrge pots sit on each side of the entrance.

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There are four wicker rocking chairs on the lower porch. The upper porch was bare of furnishing. The lawn had a good growth of green grass with foliage along the side of the fence. Two large ferns were on each side of the entrance. The back yard was not so orderly. And in out house sat on the north side with a big iron. It sitting in the middle of the yard. Mary was busy boiling clothes. [??] this [ct.?] wire and chicken yard was built on the southside. It was filled with chickens. Rebecca was proud of her chickens. Near the chicken yard was an in out house and some orange trees.

Entering the house, you step into a small hallway. There was an old [?] in the corner and a stand near the door with a calling card dish sitting on pretty embroidered scarf, pretty blue and black blocken linoleum was on the floor. To the left, on the north side, was a

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combination sitting and dining room. In this room was an old time [?], six chairs, one china closet, and sewing machine, large dining table, a small table with dishes on it in one corner, and brown linoleum was on the floor with a few pictures on the wall.

The room on the south side was a bed room, [consisting?] of a double bed, [?] wicker chair, a wash stand, clothes were hanging on the wall in the corner, and the floor was covered with a light brown rug. [?] through a [?] in the hallway you come to another bedroom. [It?] contained a double bed, wash stand, and two chairs. The clothes in the room were hanging on the wall. The floor covering was a green grass rug. The room adjoining this one was a bed room with a double bed, a cot, several chairs and a worn grass rug. Across from this bed room 13 was a small kitchen that contained an old wood stove, and a closet in which there were dishes and kitchel utensils. There was no covering on the floor. In the back hallway, Mary was busy at her ironing again.

The steps leading to the second floor were located in the back hallway. The rooms on the second floor were given over to bed rooms, all neatly furnished and clean. All of the windows had good curtains and shades to them. The house was ceiled, some of the rooms on the lower floor needed repainting. Electric lights was in all of the rooms.

John returned from [?] his mission and said, " If I did'nt have good white friends I don't know what would happen to me. I have always got along swell with them. All of my work is for them. I think we have a pretty good town. I know all of the old settlers and they will do most anything for me. It is how you treat yourself. I always mind my own business, and know how far to go. It is a blessing to live to see how things has changed. We did'nt have all the good things these children have today. I hate to say it in spite of it all they don't take advantage of their opportunities. We had to get and git back yonder. Again he had a caller, and in bidding the family good bye he said he would like for me to see him drill a well some time. Mattie and Rebecca has all smiles, and pleased over having their life's happening written up.